

Twenty-seven years ago I began swimming, learning the skills needed to race, and learning to love to compete in a way that would shape who I am as a person. Along the way I won an Olympic medal as a small town Texas high-schooler, failed to make the Olympic Team as an elite collegian, and returned to win three golds and set a world record as a young married woman. I reevaluated for a couple of years, and returned to the Olympics as a mother to win three more medals, for a total of seven Olympic medals.

Over the years, sport and life fully merged, and the dance between sport experience and life experience enriched me in ways that I appreciate daily. But days only have so many hours, and other parts of my life are asking for my time and attention. This week I am leaving elite level swimming. The 2019 National Championships will be my last swimming competition.

As I step away from this sport, I reflect on the moments that had the deepest impact on shaping the person I am today. Throughout my career I was willing to explore, step outside of the norm, and keep reinventing myself. To me, this is life! It's a continual search for our passions, how we choose to fight for them, and the people we surround ourselves with. It's fascinating to think back on my 13 year old self standing on the blocks at the 2001 Goodwill Games and to remember why that little girl wanted to swim. I vividly remember my mentality at competitions throughout my career: my stressors, pressures, ambitions, and goals. I think of the woman and mom standing on the blocks at the 2016 Rio Olympics, a very different person with very different motivations for wanting to swim, and I become incredibly proud and humbled by the transformative process I underwent.

After years of being involved in any particular passion, we are bound to run into obstacles. I've always said that what defines an athlete happens on the days we don't feel up to the task. Everyone can perform when they feel great, but what characteristics come to the surface on the bad days? We can choose to bring other people down with us, or we can choose to self reflect, consider our mentality, and discover a way to become better. Better athletes, partners, parents, and people. It's that process that makes one a champion.

Even at my lowest times, I worked to develop a plan for improvement. There were times in my career when I struggled with body image, anxiety, depression, handling pressure, and navigating my own extreme expectations for myself. I've torn my ACL, underwent heart surgery, had shoulder tendonitis, herniated a disc in my lower back, and sprained both my AC joints. There were plenty of times I could have walked away from the sport. I'm proud that I did not! Instead, I worked hard to construct a positive outlook, appreciate the small daily wins, and keep my life in perspective. It was never a decision to keep pushing the way I always had. I made the decision to reflect on the process, question it, learn from it, and figure out a healthier, stronger way to keep moving forward. All of life is a lesson, and we have so much to learn. Don't be afraid to try something new, it might be the way of the future!

I encourage the next generation of swimmers to find what drives them individually, their true motivations, because it is different for everyone. Some kids are ambitious, strong, or shy; others curious, quiet, or unafraid. They all can be champions and need the freedom to create their own unique path. I often think of the little girl who simply loved to play mermaid underwater as I watched my shadow move across the pool bottom. Jumping off my dad's shoulders hundreds of times fulfilled my love of flying through the air into the water. After all these years, I've held on to the fun of the sport that was developed at a young age. The starting block is a new version of my dad's shoulders, and the beautiful

mermaid became the fastest butterflier in the world.

To swim coaches everywhere: go to work to make athletes healthier. I had extraordinary luck in coaching. My summer league coach and my club coach were the best and most conscientious people that a child or an emerging athlete could hope for. I was taught very early to question the norm, question current technique and training styles, question the assumed lifestyle of elite athletes, and to make this process unique to me. We are a new person every single day! We can learn, adjust, evolve, and fill our hearts with what makes us feel complete. Too many people believe that elite athletes have to “give up” on many other parts of their lives. It’s all a balancing act. You have to be happy and fulfilled in life to stand up and give your best performance as an athlete. All my coaches have understood and taught the importance of life balance. Parents and coaches, I ask that you embrace this outlook as you help shape the next generation of swimmers. It’s because of my coaches that I never once questioned my ability to be a mom and be back on the Olympic podium.

In all sports, moms are proving that training during pregnancy and continuing after childbirth is possible, healthy, and empowering. There is now greater awareness of the challenges women have to face in sports when wanting to start a family. Amazing women are paving the way. The swimming community also has incredible female coaches, and in the future their presence needs to grow. I have been to three Olympics, with a total of twenty-four coaching positions. Only two of those positions have been held by a woman. I’ve had some wonderful male coaches, but as a woman, I can say that nothing can replace a female coaching presence at an emotionally complex event like the Olympics. I believe a more balanced representation of truly supportive male and female coaches can only be beneficial for all sports at all levels.

As a mom, I am grateful that USA Swimming was open to discussions heading into the 2016 Rio Olympics and granted me a little more time with my son than what is normally allowed. Still, during and after these games, I knew it wasn’t enough for me personally. Every athlete is different, and every mom needs choices. I know and understand the importance of being connected to the current team, but it’s also important for athletes to have their families and the support system they have constructed. It would be an honor to work with USA Swimming to create better guidelines for the next generation of moms.

I’m honored to have been in the sport of swimming during a time of transformation and it’s still evolving. I’ve been happy to see an increase in attendance and sport popularity that has lead to more athletes with sponsorships, higher prize money, and more opportunities for athletes to engage the public. The sport is growing and adapting in exciting ways. I love that these changes are enabling more athletes to support their families, so I know there will be an increasing number of moms in elite level swimming going forward!

On my way out the door, my gratitude and heartfelt thanks go out to the strong, powerful swimmers who will be a part of my life forever: Rebecca Soni, Ariana Kukors, Megan Jendrick, Erica Dagg, and Jeanette Ottesen, thank you for making this an unforgettable journey! Teri McKeever always told me that it wouldn’t be the medals or times that I’d remember, it would be the friends I made and the experiences we had together. Wow is that true today!

To my coaches: Janet Steenberge (Granbury Seals), my club coach Ron Forrest (Fort Worth Area Swim Team), movement specialist Milt Nelms, and especially my coach of the past 12

years, Teri McKeever (University of California, Berkeley), I am extremely thankful for your amazing guidance and I am the person I am today because of all of you!

To my parents and my brother, this journey has been a ride for the whole family! You have all supported me, guided me through life, and helped me stay grounded to what's important. Much love to my best friends Allie, Whitney, Sarah, and Mackenzie for being my lifeline through the ups and downs. I'm ready for our new adventures together!

Thank you to all the sponsors I've had in my career, your belief and support in me helped make this dream a reality. Thank you to the American Heart Association for all the speaking opportunities and your belief in my message. And a special thank you to TYR Sport, Nulo and Pampers for embracing my journey as a mom and an athlete!

Finally, to my husband Andy, you empower me to continually search my soul and find my truth, always knowing I will be loved no matter what the outcome! Your love makes me fearless heading into the future!

This is not letting go of a dream; it's having the ambition to start a new one! While it is sad to see this chapter of my life coming to a close, I do so with a full heart. Over the past twenty-seven years, I have learned lessons that will continue to shape me in the future, and I can't begin to express how thankful I am for every moment. I am in a fantastic place right now knowing my life is full of options! Now it's time for me to focus on new goals and opportunities. I am incredibly grateful for many, many years of self-discovery, pushing the limits, breaking boundaries, and being surrounded by women working to be the best that they can be! Thank you to everyone who has supported me as a fan and cheered me on during my journey. Now, I look forward to cheering on the next generation!

Dana